

***Bare Facts and Naked Truths: A New Correspondence Theory of Truth***, by George Englebretsen, Ashgate Publishing, 2006, 194 pp.

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‘To say of what is that it is not, or of what is not that it is, is false, while to say of what is that it is, and of what is not that it is not, is true’. This famous definition of truth by Aristotle captures the essence of what is known as the ‘correspondence theory of truth’. Truth consists in correspondence with the world; something—a belief, sentence, statement or ‘proposition’ (what a sentence ‘expresses’)—is true if, and only if, it corresponds with how the world is. This is our pre-theoretical notion of truth. In analytic philosophy, however, where theories of truth are one of the major (and often quite technical) issues, it remains very controversial how to formulate a viable correspondence theory of truth. Indeed, it is often considered so fraught with difficulties as to be untenable. This has serious consequences: for instance, the correspondence theory is considered to be essential to realist views of a discourse, such that if ‘rumor’ spreads that no such theory is forthcoming, the popularity of various forms of non-realism and relativism in certain important discourses, e.g. politics and the humanities, will probably increase. However, in *Bare Facts and Naked Truths*, George Englebretsen sets out to present a new version of the correspondence theory that avoids these difficulties.

Such a theory requires accounts of three elements: what are the things that are true, the ‘truth-bearers’; the relation of correspondence; and the entities in the world that the truth-bearers correspond to, the ‘truth-makers’.

On the correspondence theory, truth-makers are usually called ‘facts’. A truth-bearer is true if and only if it corresponds to a fact. Now, there is a trivial sense of ‘fact’ in which this is obviously correct: the statement that John is in love with Mary, for instance, is true if and only if it is a fact that John is in love with Mary. A fact in this sense goes hand in hand with the that-clause: ‘it is a fact that...’ However, it is generally agreed among philosophers that the correspondence theory needs a substantial notion of facts, a substantial view of the objective and non-linguistic correlate of truths, the truth-makers. What are facts in this sense? (Note that the word ‘fact’ is thus profoundly ambiguous). That is, what are facts, metaphysically speaking?

Answering this is normally considered the biggest challenge for the correspondence theory. This, it should be stressed, does not in any way mean that accounting for the two other elements, truth-bearers and the relation of correspondence—and how they link up with other philosophical notions like meaning and knowledge—is not important too. Englebretsen does attempt to account for them—indeed a significant proportion of the book is devoted to it (including attempts at solving highly technical problems in the area, such as the Liar Paradox: the paradox resulting from sentences such as ‘this sentence is false’). Having come from a strong background in logic and semantics, he deals with these issues most ably. However, in my view the main sense in which his correspondence theory is new lies in its attempts at providing a novel metaphysical view of facts.

The first two chapters of the book make up its Part One. In the first chapter, Englebretsen provides an overview of important views on truth in the history of Western philosophy; in the second, the focus is on theories of truth in analytic philosophy from Frege to Russell to Tarski to Davidson. These chapters manifest most clearly a salient feature of the book as a whole. Englebretsen is very learned and his writing is quite dense. Thus, in little space, he invokes and discusses a vast number of often very different issues and philosophers. This means that, although he strictly speaking does not presuppose that much special knowledge on the side of his readers, only professional philosophers and their graduate students with a fair amount of such knowledge are likely to feel at ease with reading this book.

The classic debate on truth in 1950 between Peter Strawson and John Austin is discussed in both of the two first chapters, creating a clear link between them. While Strawson attacked all three elements of a correspondence theory of truth—truth-bearers, the relation of correspondence, as well as facts—it was in particular the last-mentioned that he objected to. Strawson insisted that ‘fact’ is, as he put it, ‘wedded’ to ‘that’-clauses, and related to this, that facts are what statements, when true, state, not what they are about. If, for instance, ‘the cat is on the mat’ is a truth (a true sentence, statement or proposition), then there is no fact ‘in the world’—no fact in a metaphysical sense—to which the truth corresponds; there is no entity in the world other than the cat and the mat.

Austin argued that Strawson’s view was, as he put it, ‘unfair to facts’, though in a way that contemporary philosophers rightly consider very outdated. Englebretsen, by contrast, with his new correspondence theory, is most interesting. This theory is derived from the unique logic and semantics, the so-called ‘terminism’, due to Englebretsen himself and his long-time collaborator, the logician and philosopher Fred Sommers. Very briefly, on terminism. Sentences are construed as terms (nouns, predicates etc.). Like any term on this theory, a sentence ‘denotes’ one or more individuals; and a sentence is used relative to a ‘domain of discourse’. Any such domain is a ‘totality to individuals’. Englebretsen now makes use of this in his theory of truth. Taking the primary truth-bearers to be propositions (what sentences, when used in the right way, express), he maintains that ‘any true proposition is expressed by a sentence denoting the domain relative to which it is expressed’. This sounds technical, but it is very simple to state when the primary truth-bearer, a proposition, is true. It is true when, and only when, it corresponds to a fact!

It is at this point that Englebretsen believes he possesses the theoretical underpinning to provide a novel definition of ‘fact’, in the metaphysical sense. However, what is surprising is that while, unlike Strawson, he is a fan of metaphysical facts, he concurs with him that such facts are not in the world. Instead, they are of the world. A fact is, Englebretsen maintains, ‘a particular characteristic of the domain denoted by the sentence expressing it’. This characteristic he calls a ‘constitutive property’. The world itself is a domain, the most inclusive there is: the totality of all individuals. In a word, a fact is a constitutive property of the world. In short, ‘Facts are not constituents of the world, they are not in the world; facts are constitutive properties of the world’ (p. 105).

If this view is tenable, it accommodates Strawson’s sceptical intuitions about metaphysical facts. One of these intuitions was the view that when the cat is on the mat there is in the world the cat and the mat, but no third entity called a ‘fact’. The problem with this view for a correspondence theory is that this seems to remove the entire third element of the theory: the

truth-makers, the objective, non-linguistic correlates of truths, facts in the metaphysical sense. However, if Englebretsen is right, then Strawson and Austin shared a false presupposition: metaphysical facts do not have to be in the world. Indeed, they are not — so it was little wonder that Strawson did not find any. They are of the world.

Unfortunately, however, to most contemporary philosophers working in metaphysics, it makes no literal sense to say that a fact is a ‘property of the world’ or any other kind of property. Properties (being green, being a desk, etc.) can of course be ‘of’ something, and they are so when they are instantiated (exemplified, possessed, had) by that thing. But facts cannot. For no fact is a property. Facts and properties are categorially different entities, just like, say, chairs, desks, plants, animals and molecules are. Thus, to identify a fact with a certain kind of property (a ‘constitutive property’) is as wrong as it would be to identify, say, my desk with the property of being a desk.

This notion of property at issue is a ‘thick’, metaphysical one, underpinned by particular metaphysical views. Someone might therefore object that my criticism of Englebretsen is unfair: is the notion of a property he uses not that of a weaker, more pre-theoretical sense, in which it can be used interchangeably with the notion of a ‘feature’ or a ‘characteristic’ (which are notions that do not carry the same kind of ontological commitment as that of ‘property’, and which you therefore are free to identify with facts, or any other kind of thing)? It is true that there is such a notion of a property. And it may seem that it is the one Englebretsen uses here. But it is not the only one. He makes quite clear that he endorses properties in the thick sense of the contemporary Australian philosopher David Armstrong (p. 89).

It will not be of any use to Englebretsen to give up the thick sense of property. While this might make his correspondence theory coherent, it will also make it metaphysically far less interesting. And as we saw, it is precisely an account of metaphysical facts that the correspondence theory so urgently needs.

However, this criticism of Englebretsen’s metaphysics, or lack of it, does not deduct from the fact that he has provided us with a learned presentation of a new, original correspondence theory of truth, attempting to deal with all three of its elements: truth-bearers, the relation of correspondence and truth-makers.